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Review of Environmental Humanities and Theologies: Ecoculture, Literature and the Bible, by Rod Giblett

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Review of *Environmental Humanities and Theologies: Ecoculture, Literature and the Bible*, by Rod Giblett. Published by Routledge, 2018. Cover price £115.00.

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Drawing on many areas of inquiry, especially theology and ecological literary criticism, which is also called ecocriticism or ecocultural studies, Rod Giblett investigates the theological and literary underpinnings of environmental humanities in his monograph, *Environmental Humanities and Theologies: Ecoculture, Literature and the Bible*. Published by Routledge in their state-of-the-art Environmental Humanities series, Giblett's book is a welcome contribution to the field.

Research in environmental humanities draws on theories and methods from the humanities to provide more comprehensive interpretations of environmental phenomena than can be given by natural and social sciences alone. While the literary, philosophical, and historical dimensions of environmental humanities are thoroughly represented in the growing body of works dedicated to this area of inquiry, less attention is given to theology and religious studies. Furthermore, those who do attend to theological and religious perspectives on the environment do not usually consider the ways that those perspectives are reproduced in works of literature. Giblett is among the relatively small but increasing number of authors who integrate the literary and theological sides of environmental humanities.

The book offers ecological interpretations of an eclectic yet coherent assemblage of writers and traditions. At the forefront of this book is the Bible, particularly the creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis, where humans and all life on Earth are imagined as emerging from interactions between God and a primordial, elemental mixture of water and land, not unlike a wetland. The biblical "waters of the deep" are often thought of as chaotic and sinister, as something to be controlled by God. Giblett does not seek to retrieve that traditional meaning of this passage. Rather, he aims to reconstruct its meaning in an ecological context. Accordingly, he imagines the wild, watery depths of the

primordial elements as nurturing and generative, not as forces of disorder and evil (4). Wild nature operates with, not against, the creativity of God.

The author connects his ecological reconstruction of the biblical narrative with ecological interpretations of texts from English literature, from *Beowulf* to the works of J. R. R. Tolkein, as well as texts from American nature writers like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, and European Jewish thinkers, especially Walter Benjamin. Giblett also integrates perspectives from Australian Aboriginal spirituality. Along the way, Giblett regularly returns to watery depths, the wild, wetlands, and the monsters and serpents that tend to inhabit those places. He is critical of perspectives that denigrate the monstrous and the watery, and he uses ecological theology and ecocultural studies to articulate salutary reinterpretations. Even works that are ostensibly friendly toward nature, like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by Tolkein, are shown to have biases against wetlands, as evidenced by Tolkein's pejorative use of wetland imagery in the "Dead Marshes" that show up in *The Two Towers*, the second volume of the trilogy (30).

Giblett's book is divided into two parts, an old and new testament, as it were. The first part is comprised of five chapters which focus on the dynamics of creation, dynamics that are described in terms that integrate theological and literary perspectives on wetlands and their various real and imaginary inhabitants. The second part includes four chapters that represent the new testament, including chapters elucidating the Christian vision of the seventeenth-century English writer John Bunyan, criticizing the ecology and gender politics of John Muir's denigration of the spiritual value of women and wetlands, synthesizing Benjamin and Thoreau on the topic of being at home at the end of the world, and evoking the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous traditions.

The final chapter looks forward, with hope, to the possibility of recuperating indigenous perspectives on the mutuality of humans and wild nature, particularly in light of Australian Aboriginal representations of the Rainbow Serpent, a mythic creature dwelling in the watery depths from which all things emerge (148). The Rainbow Serpent is celebrated as a maternal monster of the primordial marsh. That image is indicative of possibilities for affirmative relationships with all aspects of the natural world, including

those wild creatures that are repeatedly denigrated in the theological and literary works of the English-speaking world.

Wetlands, marshes, bogs, and their inhabitants are crucial to the functioning of planetary systems of biodiversity, climate, and the hydrologic cycle. Ultimately, Giblett hopes that his spiritual reinterpretation of those habitats and inhabitants will facilitate their ecological reconciliation as well. Giblett implores the reader to care for the creatures that make up the monstrous and watery wild. "Please help conserve them and their homes of places on, under and above the earth. After all, it is their—and our—only home" (160).

Environmental Humanities and Theologies follows after several other books by Giblett, spanning over two decades, focusing extensively on wetlands and their multifarious mixtures of nature and culture. This book is a condensed collection of many of the ideas presented in those earlier works. Furthermore, the eclectic scope of this book accompanies an audacious aim to find resources for addressing the challenges of living in the Anthropocene—a geological epoch in which human impacts on the environment have become planetary in scale and scope. In contrast to the Anthropocene, Giblett aims to facilitate a "Symbiocene," wherein human domination of nature would be replaced by mutuality between humans and nature (158). What is particularly audacious is that Giblett envisions this book as "a new 'bible,'" that is, "a new old and new testament for the symbiocene" (18). To be sure, Giblett is not expressing delusions of grandeur. Rather, his gesture indicates his bold and daring attempt to cultivate a compelling sense of the sacred as it manifests throughout the natural world, even in bogs and marshes, and among crocodiles and monsters. This book "has no pretensions to being a sacred text, but aims to nurture sacrality" (ibid.).

This book is particularly relevant to students or scholars who are new to the intersection of ecology, theology, and literature. It is oriented toward encouraging first steps toward thinking and living differently in relationship to one's place in nature. It does not attempt to explicate the details that must be worked out in order to enact sustainable changes in religious institutions and other sociocultural systems.

Nonetheless, even for professionals and experts who are already engaged in the work of protecting life on Earth, this book provides a unique perspective for understanding how religion and literature shape the way that humans think, feel, and act toward the watery and monstrous faces of the natural world.